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Spiritual Nature

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Spiritual Nature

Immersed in nature and alone with my ceramic forms and found objects from the forest, I created a number of sculptures and then selected four to include in my Master of Arts show. Working out in the natural landscape was a spiritual experience, as well as a creative one. My clay forms became a tangible form of my spirit. This body of ceramic sculptures was a re-discovery of my spirituality. An inner force was brought out in my sculptures and intermixed with nature. Plants in particular and nature as a whole are thought to have spiritual qualities. I also feel that this life force in nature is most evident when the wind blows through the trees and smaller plants. This motion was an inspiration for me to create a sense of motion in my ceramic sculptures. Additionally, I used elements of texture, light and shadow to bring out the simulated motion I tried to create in my work.

Native plants from the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia and West Virginia directly influenced my installation. (See figures 1 & 2) Working in this environment gave me a sense of calmness that I have always enjoyed whenever I was out in the woods. The noise that people make was at a minimum. Working alone in the woods, away from the confines of the studio, helped me to foster a spiritual connection with nature in creating my sculptures. It was not one single action or thing which I can account for the spiritual upwelling but, several; being out in the woods, working on my sculptures – creating, or studying the effects of wind on nearby plants. I wanted to create what I thought would be a concrete representation of my spirit by creating a sense of motion found in the movement of leaves and plants. The thin and supple quality of the plants provided a challenge for me to create clay forms that were also thin and simulated motion or undulation as if in water or wind.

The thinness of the clay forms produced thin edges of the forms and the sense of motion gleaned from plants. Together these thin lines represent the motion of my spirit as it moved within me. Not sharp, but soft and smooth moving as if being blown by a breeze. Also, the lines and the thin edges resembled the softly curving lines found in calligraphy. In calligraphy the artist's hand guides the brush in creating organic lines that seem to express linear movements found in nature, the broken edge of a rock or stone, a twig, or a blade of grass. The experienced calligrapher creates lines that seem to come from his soul and out onto the paper, leaving only the ink behind as a visible mark of his thoughts and feelings.

In addition to the edges of the clay forms, the impression of motion was created in several ways, as a line for the eye to follow; a pathway was created when the ceramic elements were placed up against a log in descending order and then sliding down onto the leaves. The tree branch was the vehicle of motion in the case of the *Nature of the Square*. The viewer's eye is led through the sculpture sliding along the smooth lines of the branch just above the irregular shapes of the ceramic forms and the leaves. A final impression of motion is in the ceramic forms themselves. Each piece has curves or undulations which create a sense of motion. When the forms are used in layers there is a flow of motion throughout the entire work.

Motion was incorporated with texture and shadows of the forms. Surface texture was created by rolling clay slabs between burlap. This texture was enhanced by small shadows created by the burlap impressions and by the larger shadows created by the curves of the clay forms. This was most evident when working out-of-doors as the sun moved across the sky during the day. The shadows changed direction as the sun moved,

changing the appearance of the surface of the clay forms. The play of light and dark on the surfaces of the clay was echoed in the surrounding bed of leaves as well. During the day when the breeze blew, the shadows of tree branches and leaves overhead danced over the surface of the sculptures adding motion and giving them life.

The different times of day also affected the placement of shadows on the surface of the sculptures. Also, the intensity of the light changed throughout the day. Morning and late afternoon light was not as harsh as the light at the mid-day. I found that the afternoon light gave me the best results with shadows. The light reflected by the white of the clay was not as harsh as mid-day sunlight. Morning light was not strong enough to give well defined shadows on the sculptures.

Additionally, the color white was chosen to bring out light, dark and shades of gray in the shadows. Darker shades of colors would have swallowed up the shadows and the final effect would not have been as dramatic.

Working in the woods creating sculptures with the ceramic forms, the individual pieces were reused over and over again to make different configurations. I would set up one sculpture, photograph it, and then disassemble the sculpture and move on to the next idea. When I set up my installation in the gallery, improvised to accommodate four assemblages needing to be set up at the same time, I had a limited number of ceramic forms to use. For this reason, in the final presentation the individual elements were a little different from the configurations set up in the woods.

The prominent configuration of the ceramic forms was a fan design that I used repeatedly in different arrangements. I looked for interesting formations in living trees, and then I set up the sculptures. I looked for trees, tree roots, and logs that had fallen

over, tree trunks with burls or knots, or trees with a trunk that branched out into two or more trunks as possible sites for setting up sculptures. The natural formations made it challenging to create larger sculptures because the clay forms could be placed higher on the tree and held in place with the rough and deep texture of the bark. I photographed all of the sculptures before disassembling them to make other sculptures. The photographs are the only evidence of the existence of these sculptures.

Another element was the fragrance of the leaves used in the installation. I was aware of the sweet smell of leaves but in the closed environment of the gallery the smell is much more noticeable. It added another dimension to the exhibition in that the viewer may remember what it is like when they walked in the woods. After being in the in-door gallery space for a few days, the leaves became dry and brittle. When the show ends they will be returned to the forest where they came from. Then they will continue to break down, decay and return to the soil to provide nutrients for surrounding plants.

The selection of trees and branches used in the sculptures was very important. In the woods there are many downed trees and scattered tree branches which were in various states of decomposition. I looked for parts of trees that I could lift and move to my sculpture garden in order to set up my sculptures. Wet and rotten wood was not suitable. Of the wood selected for use in my sculptures the log used in *Lichen Tower* was probably the most interesting because of the woodpecker holes. It was hollow; the wood had checks and no bark. Not much was cut off to remove it from where it was standing in the woods beside the lane. Also, the placement of the clay forms on the log was similar to lichens attached to a dead tree. The stump used in *Tree Line* was a challenge to move and clean. The stump had been laying out in the weather for a number of years, and the

outer layers of pulp wood were gone, leaving lines of the harder wood. The branches used in the *Nature of the Square* and *Nature Shrine* were found lying on the ground near where I was working. They were dry and in good condition for my purposes.

The area in the woods that I selected to work (which I called my sculpture garden), had small tree branches covered by layers of leaves which made uneven ground in places for walking. Also, the ground was home to several colonies of ants which were disturbed by my walking around the area while working.

The months of June and July were hot and dry. As I worked in the heat, the sweat rolled off and dropped onto the clay forms as I set up different configurations. My daily ritual was to go out into the heat to work, selecting a spot on the ground, in or on a tree to set up a sculpture, selecting clay forms to use then setting to work creating new sculptural forms.

My creative work in the woods instilled in me a sense of urgency because I knew that my time was limited. There were only a few months to create new sculptures for my show before I had to leave the area. Away from the woods I would be unable to do my work.

The title *Spiritual Nature* has a double meaning. One meaning is that nature is a spiritual force that is present in everything, plants, rocks, water, animals, air, and weather. These elements almost have a will or voice of their own, and are characterized as having an almost human presence. Many times nature is personified as an adversary of humans while other times nature seems kind and nurturing towards people. In reality nature is indifferent to the activities of humans. Also, nature can refer to life in general

encompassing living things and to some extent nonliving things such as rocks and minerals. Nature can be a single entity or the life force of all living things.

As I became more aware of my spirituality as I worked on my sculptures, I realized that I was not unique in believing that nature had spiritual qualities. The concept of spirit in nature is a human construct that has proliferated throughout human history. For example, modern day Wicca and Navajo cultures see nature as having living spirits. There are variations in this ideology, but there are similarities as well. One of the major beliefs is that the earth is a living entity and should be listened to, learned from, and respected. The planet we live on is referred to as Mother Earth. We see the planet as a living entity that gives life, nurtures and sustains all life and should be treated as a living being.

The Navajo believe that all life, plants and animals along with rocks, water, wind, colors and the four directions all had spirit. For there to be harmony, everything needs to be in balance. When a person was sick it was because bad spirits had entered the body and thrown things out of balance for that person. The Shaman would perform a ceremony using sand paintings to put balance back into the sick person's life. The Shaman's role was to sing or chant while the sand paintings were made by attendants who were trained in creating sand paintings. The sick person would sit in the middle of the sand painting and pray along with the chanting. Then after a prescribed length of time the sand painting would be swept away and the person was on his or her way to having a balanced life once more.

The Navajo use sand paintings as part of a religious ceremony for healing the sick. It is historical and time honored and the paintings vary with the artist's interpretation of the particular spirit called upon to heal.

The Wicca view nature as a manifestation of divine energy. The Wicca listened to what the earth had to say and stayed in tune with the planet. This seems similar to the Navajo beliefs of the earth and the spirits that live in all that we call our planet Earth.

In my work I do not seek out the spirits in nature as the Navajo or the Wicca for guidance in my life. My spirit is made physical in my clay forms. It is a personal experience where I am seeking knowledge of myself. If there is mysticism in spiritual nature I will leave that to others.

For me the meaning of *Spiritual Nature* is my internal life force that is ever present and usually quiet. When I am surrounded by living things I enjoy such as plants, I have time to think and contemplate or meditate on my activities or events in my life or future plans.

Spirituality is not a thing that can be seen, touched or moved around at will. It is an internal force that drives me to do many things, and to make my art. Sometimes I am not aware of its presence.

When talking about the spirit, an ephemeral entity, it can be difficult to re-define into a tangible object. However, I think of my spirit as an object that has smooth rounded edges. The clay forms looked delicate and fragile in comparison to the sturdy trees that surrounded them in the woods.

My spirit is dynamic and will adapt to change like the appearance of my sculptures as the configurations change as they are rebuilt and reconstructed. They are

movable and variable, changing and transforming motion as the visitor moves around the sculptures. They are strong yet they seem fragile, but like my spirit, their strength lies in their flexibility and resiliency to change.

Peacefulness is what I want the viewer to experience as they look at the works in my sculpture garden. It was not my original intention to create a calm environment, but something I discovered as I worked. Perhaps it was a change of pace from going to classes during the week. I allowed myself the time to slow down, reflect or meditate, create sculptures, and be out-of-doors.

The *Lichen Tower* (See figures 3 - 5) I consider a Tree of Life. The tree once was alive. It thrived and then died many years ago. As it decomposed it provided food for surrounding plants. Woodpeckers made holes for shelter and to find insects to eat. It now has a new life as the main element to my sculpture. I see the tree as still alive but its purpose has changed from a plant of the forest, growing, providing food and shelter for the animals to an aesthetic component.

Small clay forms were placed in the checks of the wood. The verticality of these cracks made it difficult to place the clay forms horizontally as lichens grow on dead trees. I did not want to destroy the old tree trunk with horizontal saw cuts, so I used what there were--vertical checks that occurred naturally as the tree slowly decayed.

This sculpture also has a path for the eye to follow from the top down the sides to the bottom and on to the leaves. The tree has lost its flexibility; it is fixed and rigid. A sense of motion is created by the sides and edges of the forms going one into another. The smoothness of the wood aids the eye in gliding down from the top to the ground. The log is hollow but I placed two smaller forms at the bottom. They seem to come out

of the log or they could be going into the log as if to hide or hibernate. This suggests a reality, what a living animal might do. The tree appears to be given new life and reinvigorated it with purpose once again.

The same can be said of *Tree Line* (See figures 6 - 8). The old stump was given new life and purpose as well. It provided a backdrop or prop for the clay forms to grow out of the leaves much like Indian Pipes. These are white herbs that do not have chlorophyll, they grow in little clumps and they look like a pipe with the mouth piece down in the dirt and the curved bowl at the top. They help in the decomposition of plants. So I created sense of life with the clay forms. Along with the clay forms and plants I wanted to create a feeling of movement by having the clay forms coming from the opposite side, flowing like water, creeping slowly under the stump and away from the source in a dissimilar configuration from the forms on the opposite side.

Nature of the Square (See figures 13 - 15) is more two-dimensional and is laid out in three layers, leaves, clay forms and tree branch. This sculpture represents my emotional self. The leaves represent my emotions that I carry with me every day. These feelings, some days, are fragile and get crushed easily, while others are left intact and unaffected by my tasks and duties I must perform throughout the day or week. The clay forms represent another layer of my emotions as more tasks and requirements are placed on me. These too will break or will be crushed if the pressure gets to be too much while others are resistant to the pressures of life. The tree branch signifies latest task I have to accomplish. As responsibilities and new jobs pile up or accumulate, sometimes I am weighed down until I could break into many pieces. If any one of the three elements

were taken out of my life, I would be incomplete as a person. That is how my life is, many responsibilities and requirements I must do throughout my life.

Nature Shrine was similar to *Nature Line* in that the clay forms were supported but by a tree branch. My shrine is dedicated to nature and my offerings are objects found in the woods and other places. (See figures 9 - 12) When this sculpture was set up out-of-doors the wind blew these small clay forms off the branches and the offerings were lost in the leaves. My offerings consisted of dead insects, moths, butterflies, bees, and a walking stick. Plant materials included pine cones, a leaf, acorns and husks from hickory nuts. Animals were represented with a bird feather, snail and the turtle shell. All of these objects were found with no intention to represent any particular season, just random objects found in the woods. The intention of the sculpture is not to create a shrine for others to come and add offerings and prayers, but to let the viewers create for themselves a sense of what a shrine is. Also, the quiet gallery allows the viewer to come to a place that has a calm and contemplative environment.

A thought about the surface of my clay forms is that the burlap texture was impersonal. They had no trace of me on the surface. I needed to impart part myself on the surface of each clay form through hand prints or finger prints. I believe that the color white was a good choice. It is in line with the color of my spirit which I feel is translucent. White had its purpose to help accentuate the shadows, but there are other colors that I need to explore that might achieve the same effect or evoke some other element or something I have not considered yet.

In my work I feel that I created a sense of calmness and serenity while I was working alone without distractions or interruptions. I felt as if my spirit and creativity

was infused into each piece and becoming part of it. Leaving the gallery space and installing my sculptures out in nature and letting them become part of the landscape was a new concept for me, and at the same time a challenging one. Now in my father's woods I've found a perfect space for my work, a place where I am calm and unhurried. This is the place where I made decisions, confronted challenges, and made discoveries, not only about my creative process but about myself. This was a rediscovery of my spirituality.

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